Oh, Bondage, Up Yours!

Punk, urban folklore, and folk horror in *Huesera* (2022)

Valeria Villegas Lindvall

Huesera (Michelle Garza Cervera, 2022) follows the story of Valeria (Natalia Solián), a young woman whose pregnancy is haunted by a folk figure referred to as *La Huesera* (The Bone Woman). This haunting coincides with Valeria's re-encounter with her punk teenage love, Octavia (Mayra Batalla), and both occurrences begin to raise multiple questions about the main character's upward social mobility and her marriage to Raúl (Alfonso Dosal) as heteronormative bondage. Valeria navigates her trials accompanied by her queer-coded *tía* (auntie) Isabel (Mercedes Hernández).[1] Isabel is depicted as the only site of solace for Valeria in a family that bombards her with merciless expectations and banishes the Huesera along with "*comadres*" (friends), queer-coded women that hold knowledges of *brujería* (witchcraft) practiced in collectivity. Valeria's struggle between heterosexual marriage and queer freedom lead to a painful realisation during the banishing: as she meets face-to-face with the Huesera, it is suggested that this terrifying figure and her are one and the same.

Valeria renounces a safe life of normative bliss and ultimately decides to leave her family in pursuit of her individuality, a process prompted by the intercession of her punk past and the collective wisdom that witchcraft affords. This narrative provides fascinating ground to rethink folklore, its implications in the Mexican context, and the ways in which folk horror can reveal the tensions between order and chaos, normativity and subversion. This essay is thus a meditation on the power of punk, horror, and folklore as experienced in collectivity.

In *Huesera*, all three vectors converge in a thought-provoking iteration of female and feminist folk horror. This essay explores the ways in which our understanding of folk horror can be expanded in novel ways through the application of concepts that stem from Latin American aesthetics, and from Bolívar Echeverría's notions of the *ethos barroco* and *codigofagia* specifically. By way of introduction, Echeverría defines the former as a sensibility that champions the esoteric and creative which stem from *and* can resist the colonisation of cultural production that sets eurocentric knowledge as an undisputed point of reference. For Echeverría,

[1] Isabel is strongly implied to be a spinster auntie, which allows the character to be constituted throughout the film as a queer elder to Valeria.

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this ethos can provide an alternative to the stifling, realist, and capitalist modes that are trademarks of colonial modernity. Further, he offers the concept of *codigofagia*—in this essay, recuperated from Ítala Schmelz's interpretation of Echeverría—as the adoption, adaptation, and subversion of dominant codes. Such a distinctly rebellious aesthetic strategy embraces its imposed alterity by championing the subaltern as a valid place of enunciation. I posit that the *ethos barroco* and *codigofagia* draw kinship with punk's recycling and subversion of dominant codes in popular culture, disavowing and resisting normativity.

Consequently, I propose that *Huesera* brings punk to the fore as modern, urban folklore. In doing so, the film illustrates a unique iteration of baroque, punk-folk horror that also engages with the notion of *brujería* not as noxious knowledge, but rather, as a practice of queer renewal in collectivity and community. I tackle the film's portrayal of *brujería* as queer, embodied knowledge by Valeria's elders led by Isabel, and therefore establish queer collectivity's political relevance to recuperate and harness the power of jettisoned epistemologies by constituting a counterpublic that exercises resistance (Majewska, 2021). In other words, where capitalism sets the tone for extreme individuation, queer, intergenerational community reads as a punk gesture of resistance thoroughly illustrated in *Huesera*. I then go on to discuss the ways that this specific iteration of Mexican punk—a form closely related to seditious practices of *codigofagia*—can be understood in connection to folk horror to facilitate the interrogation of uneven, gendered, and classed distributions of power, highlighting impoverishment, oppression, and disenfranchisement as consequences of *and* prerequisites to coloniality.

Young, punk, and queer

On the radical bones of queer joy

One of the most striking passages of *Huesera* stresses the freedoms of punk joy, which as we will see are key to the film's subversive potentialities. *¡No me gusta la domesticación!* yell the young women in Forra, an all-female punk band screeching at the top of their lungs in their song "Pantera."[2] The song blasts and memory assaults Valeria while she takes a bath, her pregnant belly protruding through the water. This scene connects the character with her past self, as a cut ushers us to a time when Valeria's head was held underwater in a teenage punk rite of endurance. Suffocating but victorious, she rises and is rewarded with a *caguama* (a

[2] *I don't like domestication!* in Spanish, though the punk sentiment of the performance would translate to a harsher "I hate domestication." Director Michelle Garza Cervera is part of Forra, which ties the film to her active engagement with punk creativity and politics —she has also been a part of Especie Fallida and Secreto Público, both Mexican punk acts.

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litre of beer) from the hand of her friend Edna (Luisa Almaguer).[3] Laughing and encircled by her peers, Valeria and a gang of young punks curse at the off-screen voice of an annoyed neighbour, who scolds them into shutting up. Among shanties and ruinous buildings of an unidentified but unmistakenly Mexican *barrio*, joy ensues in their continued embrace of punk collectivity.

City lights blink like a million fireflies on the horizon of a wide shot, and Valeria gazes at her sullen girlfriend, Octavia. Sounds of the city are preeminent, and punk frenzy gives way to an intimate passage in which Valeria and Octavia talk about the former's decision to apply to college instead of their running away together. Valeria imagines a future in education and social reputability. Conflicted, Octavia supports Valeria's decision. Suddenly, the sweet stillness of queer recognition is interrupted by off-screen sirens: the punks are being chased by the police. As they run towards the camera, young Valeria faces us yelling '¡*NO ME GUSTA LA DOMESTICACIÓN!*' There was once a *now* that could become *forever*, but the scene is abruptly cut as we are ripped back to Valeria's current, uneventful home life. She sits on a rocking chair: now never became forever. This succession of scenes encapsulates the horrors and battles in *Huesera*: stifling mandates versus independence, normativity versus rebelliousness. This drastic cut is not without cruelty. It presents the viewer with the vastness of youth that expands as far as the horizon does, curtailed by the expectation of motherhood as the endgame of "growing up": it implies a severe break where the rocking chair and the cradle have become cages.

As I mention above, Valeria's pregnancy is marked by two simultaneous events that trigger her conflict between present and past, stifling household life and queer freedom. First, her rekindling an affair Octavia—and with it, her reencounter with queer pleasure and joy. Second, the haunting of La Huesera, a figure recuperated by psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés' writing on folk archetypes as an embodiment of female power.[4] Estés' take on the Huesera suggests a reading of the spectre as a harbinger of self-determination. For the author, the Huesera is a wanderer that goes by many names throughout the Americas, among them "La Huesera, Bone Woman; La Trupera, The Gatherer, and La Loba, Wolf Woman" (1997, 25). Estés characterizes the Huesera's ancestral role as an archetype that begets unification, stating in a poetic register that

> We all begin as a bundle of bones lost somewhere in a desert, a dismantled skeleton that lies under the sand. It is our work to recover the parts. It is a painstaking process best done when the shadows are just

[3] Luisa Almaguer is a noted Mexican trans singer. Her presence winks towards her as a cornerstone of queer artistry and underscores the dissident, inclusive nature of punk as community portrayed in the film. Further, this seemingly unassuming gesture ties her brief role in the film to the experience of unapologetic queer joy, powerfully foreclosing the recurrent reduction of trans and queer existence as marked by perpetual trauma and suffering.

[4] Garza points towards Estés' take on female archetypes of rebellion in lore during her interview with André Hecker from the Devils & Demons Podcast in the frame of the German Fantasy Filmfest 2022. Available at https://vimeo.com/744176387 (Accessed 28 August 2024).

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> right, for it takes much looking. *La Loba* [La Huesera] indicates what we are to look for—the indestructible life force, the bones. (26)

Here, Estés underlines the folk figure as a guide and as a reparative presence, opening the possibility of understanding folk female hauntings as catalysts for change and contestation. As Valeria is represented facing several transitions between her former and present self, and navigating between the alternatives of queer, punk joy and heteronormative safety, her "parts" become scattered. In this quest, she is painfully undone and broken apart to be mended as an individual by the intervention of queer community and its practice of *brujería*—an endeavour that cannot happen without the Huesera. The unearthing and puzzling out of all these moving parts in the film, I suggest, is also accompanied by her reencounter with punk culture, its rawness and renewing energy.

Considering its recuperation of the Huesera as a folk figure and punk as urban folklore, I understand the film to facilitate an innovative iteration of folk horror at the service of female and feminist contestation. As we will see, the Huesera seems to herald misfortune as Valeria's pregnant body changes and grows, now unrecognizable from her younger self. However, she is conveyed as a figure of change and fragmentation—not all for the worst. The Huesera prefigures a rift between Valeria's own self and her child, but also between her present and her past. Scared by this occurrence, Valeria turns to her Isabel, who protects her with *limpias* (cleansing rituals) and eventually casts the Huesera out aided by her friends, seemingly prompting Valeria's decision to walk out on her family and, with this, suggesting her being whole again as a possible victory of feminist self-determination.

"Yeah, so fucking what, I'm a girl and here's my ghetto pal"[5]

On the female uses of folk horror

Huesera's production is a display of female collaboration: its script was written by Garza Cervera and Abia Castillo, and its production lined up a crew of mostly female collaborators at all levels of production. *Huesera* was one of three female-directed horror films supported by the fiscal stimulus EFICINE 226/189 between 2007 and 2020, after Eva Aridjis's *Los ojos azules* (*The Blue Eyes*, 2012) and Issa López's *Vuelven* (*Tigers are not Afraid*, 2017). EFICINE is a measure meant to boost film production in Mexico by providing tax cuts to private investors. The scheme had only financed

[5] Kim Gordon recounts a tour date with Sonic Youth in Richmond on September 14th, 1987, as an obnoxious man tried to impress her. The full quote reads: 'He said that he could be making a lot of money selling crack, but he preferred to play music. I really felt like saying to him, "Yeah, so fucking what, I'm a girl and here's my ghetto pal"'. Kim Gordon, 'Boys Are Smelly: Sonic Youth Tour Diary, '87', in *Rock She Wrote. Women Write about Rock, Pop and Rap*, eds. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (London: Plexus, 1995), p. 68.

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roughly 40 genre features out of 743 projects between 2007 and 2020, and only three were directed by women (Villegas Lindvall 2021: 74). *Huesera* was also awarded Best Feature Film at Sitges Film Festival in 2022 and the Best First Feature Ariel the following year, illustrating the increasing interest in Mexican, female-centred and feminist efforts in genre film.[6]

Huesera's flexibility as a text that lends itself to allegory in its treatment of the Huesera as a folk figure allows for its reading as a critical reformulation of modes such as the Gothic (as I argue elsewhere) and folk horror (as I argue here) to subversive ends.[7] The film allows for multiple interpretations within the two aforementioned modes, which illustrates Alison Peirse's and Lingzhen Wang's discussions about the variety and complexity of cinema*s* by women. Peirse cites Wang, who claims that "'women's cinema is geopolitically and historically contingent' and 'women's films resist uniform meaning.' For Wang [Peirse continues citing], 'gender matters' but gender itself is 'a *historically and geopolitically specific concept* always in need of close examination'" (Wang qtd. in Peirse 2024, emphasis added). Recuperating Wang, Peirse asserts that women's (horror) cinemas resist facile interpretation as transnational and transcultural, which also stresses the capability of filmmaking to provide a space for diverse feminist world-making. Following this line of thought, I set out to demonstrate that it is crucial to insert the study of women-created folk horror into a larger effort of decolonial critique that can better account for the cultural, industrial, and political particularities of the Global South and its audiovisual production by drawing from its philosophies and knowledges.

I draw from folk horror as a framework and Latin American aesthetic theory as applied by Bolívar Echeverría and Ítala Schmelz to posit that folk horror operates as a register that can be metabolized, adapted, and brought into twenty-first-century Mexico in order to illuminate the horrors of normativity. The folklore of Mexico City punk is essential here, for it provides a backdrop within which this operation is possible. As I discuss in later sections, the capitalist disenchantment behind the punk chronotype "there is no future"—often accompanied by its kindred motto, "life stinks," which Greil Marcus offers by way of ontological statement (1993, 183)— is reformulated in *Huesera* to offer that "there is no *capitalist*, *colonial* future."

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[6] The Premio Ariel is the highest accolade awarded by the Mexican Academy of Film Arts and Sciences.

[7] Elsewhere, I offer an analysis of the film as a reformulation of gothic's critique on imperialism and coloniality, elaborating at length on epistemic racism from a complementary angle to this essay. See "Witchcraft and witch-hunts. Subversive sorcery and reparative witchcraft: *Huesera*'s (2022) challenges to coloniality in the witch." Forthcoming. In *The Cambridge Companion to World Gothic Literature*, Rebekah Cumpsty & R. Duncan, eds. Cambridge University Press.

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In order understand the interlocking of the Huesera as a folk figure, *brujería* as jettisoned knowledge, and punk as urban folklore in the context of the film, it is useful to posit that folk horror can act as a prism through which to understand subversion, as Adam Scovell offers (2017, 5-10). One could argue that Estés' recuperation of the folklore woven around the Huesera as a figure exemplifies this operation, whereby a revisionist and female rewriting of lore is performed in order to underscore the disowning and silencing of women at the service of patriarchal tales of collective memory. Therein lies the flexibility of folk horror, as well as its subversive potentialities.

It is therefore fitting that I revisit this generous and dynamic definition, following Dawn Keetley's and Ruth Heholt's call to look beyond Scovell's British canon and its "folk horror chain" namely: "landscape, isolation, skewed morality (of the isolated community) and the culminating 'summoning or happening,'" a paradigm that describes an agent from a perceived "civilization" coming to confront the arcane and discovering that which lurks underneath a façade of law and order (Heholt and Keetley 2023, 2). It is by virtue of a game of juxtapositions (civilized/savage, modern/arcane, female/male, and superstition/science and Christianity, all hierarchically opposed) that folk horror allows for the fears of collectivity to come to the fore. Keetley's and Heholt's revision of Scovell aptly strips back the definition: "after all, folk horror derives from folklore—from the roots of *community* and *communal* fears" (2013, 1). Skilfully treading between progressive critique and conservative fear-mongering, folk horror toys with a fear of the dissolution of the status quo.

As I discuss below regarding Valeria's reinvention through her initiation into *brujería* by her *tía* and her queer collective, *Huesera* intimates a future beyond a colonial framework whereby the "the colonizer's language and discourse are elevated to the status of arbiter of truth and reality," as María Lugones writes (2006, 81). If we are to understand this language as articulating power alongside the conspicuous enmeshment of the languages of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism—as Lugones boldly posits—laying the foundation for the arrangement of cultural, economic, and political life within coloniality, in this case horror, lurks in the prospect of endangering the (colonial) modern Mexican family as a paradigmatic institution of national identity. Challenging this structure entails a larger, communal fear of the dissolution of capitalist realism—in Mark Fisher's conception (2009)—as a seemingly inescapable and hopeless condition inherent to colonial modernity. This is to say, Valeria's renouncing of the colonial and capitalist arrangement of the nuclear family in favour of her individuality as facilitated by her queer cohort entails a negation of capitalist reality: she is suggested as embracing a wholeness that stands

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outside of expectations casted upon her, knowingly renouncing the role of tender mother.

As Jamie Chambers writes, folk horror's generous flexibility also stands in relation to its inextricability from the exoticization of the Other in an imperial register of exploitation (2022, 9-10). This contention makes it a productive vehicle for understanding the particularities of Latin American cultural production as profoundly traversed by capitalism as an arm of coloniality. Importantly, Chambers critiques the lack of interrogation of folk horror's tendencies towards exoticisation and cultural appropriation. The author's critical discussion of these matters resonates with my application of decolonial critique here and in my previous writing, for it underscores the usefulness of Latin American aesthetic and political theory in illuminating the discursive implications of both the fetishization of difference *and* its reappropriation and subversion through the authorship and representation of the subalternized.[8] In *Huesera*, the showcasing of punk politics and aesthetics in their specificity as they pertain to Mexican popular culture suggests a vindication and revision of punk culture as urban lore that drinks from the dominant codes it has historically resisted in order to coin its own imaginary, providing a radical possibility associated with *codigofagia*.

To explore how this discursive operation is performed, I turn to Bolívar Echeverría's critique of colonial modernity through the baroque ethos (*ethos barroco*), which he conceptualizes as a lens through which Latin American cultural production can be understood. The author posits that, at its core, Latin American cultural production is traversed and riddled by a civilizational crisis undetachable from colonial modernity. For Echeverría, as for Enrique Dussel and Walter Mignolo, modernity is a colonial construct that aligns with a puritan and neo-European framework where time is a teleological project with progress as its endgame (1996, 69-70). This colonial modernity is also perpetuated by aesthetic canons arbitrating cultural production. The philosopher articulates the notion of the *ethos barroco* as a response to the association Max Weber asserts between capitalism and the protestant ethos, referring to the *ethos barroco* as a mode that intimates creativity and resistance. For Echeverría, this ethos can be a critical tool of the subalternized when it is read as a rejection of colonial, capitalist mandates that suppress creativity. This is to say, Echeverría understands this "baroque" creativity as a product and even potential alternative to address the contradictions of the alienating realism that stands as a trademark of colonial modernity (1996, 72; 74).

[8] See "Me quitarán de quererte, Llorona, pero de olvidarte nunca. La Llorona, colonial trauma and Mexicanness," in D. Keetley and R. Heholt (eds.), *Folk Horror: New Global Pathways* (University of Wales Press, 2023), pp. 229-242.

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As Dussel explains, Echeverría's *ethos barroco* teases the promise of "a non-capitalist modernity," which can be productively understood as driving *Huesera*'s reformulation of the folk horror chain in favour of a reparative reading of the "savagery" of folk belief while also teasing possible futures beyond mandates of colonial arbitration of the erotic in the convivial unit of the family by championing queer community (2017, 243). The acknowledgement of folk belief as a valid source of knowledge, as we will see in *Huesera*'s depiction of *brujería* as shared, everyday practice, reminds us of the "esoteric" championing of creativity that Echeverría associates with the *ethos barroco*.

Speaking to the relevance of Echeverría's writing, Ítala Schmelz recuperates his formulations to think through Mexican genre filmmaking as indicative of a different kind of modernity, which adopts subalternization as a critical stance. Therefore, both thinkers characterize this ethos as a strategy of sabotage, "the ethos of the subverted, not [the] subjugated," where *codigofagia* is performed to dissident ends (Schmelz 2022, 16). Importantly, Schmelz also notes that the advancement of colonial modernity has entailed the folklorization of autochthonous knowledges. With this assertion, we are invited to think through the problematization of the notion of folklore as a step towards the indictment of epistemic racism. In Schmelz's formulations, the concept can be productively unpacked to underline how coloniality of knowledge relies on epistemicide by relegating ancestral and pre-invasion belief to the past, characterising these practices as superstition and stultification counter to progress and, thus, as incompatible with colonial modernity (26). The indictment of folklorization in Schmelz underlines the importance of Latin American thought to nuance our understanding of the term "folklore," its limitations and political implications in the characterisation of *Huesera* as a work of Latin American folk horror.

There is no escape from colonial modernity and its structures, but there is promise in sabotage. Following Dussel, Echeverría, and Schmelz, we can understand colonial modernity as a teleological, capitalist project that bets on linear time in service of production. Such an understanding of colonial modernity as teleological draws kinship with Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013) and Bliss Cua Lim (2009), who suggest that temporal linearity is where settler colonialism can also exercise violence, creating its own hauntings. The Huesera can be said to illustrate this. As a liminal presence, she lurks within the margins of this unquestionable linear arrangement of time. For example, insisting on Valeria's punk past sliding into her present, the film inserts itself in the peripheral communities that inhabit "civilisation" in plain sight to undermine its hierarchies and structures, down to the very organisation of time. What is more, by enlisting the help

of Isabel's queer coven of women, the film also offers a reparation and vindication of folk belief facilitated and transmitted by queer, female elders, which the banishing of the Huesera towards the end of the film exemplifies. Here, I wish to stress the importance of knowledge as an embodied practice, which is constantly and continuously jettisoned in the hierarchization of scientific knowledge over superstition as a tension that folk horror illuminates. As we will see, the final ritual played out by the end of the film confronts Valeria with the Huesera, splits her open, and has her finally find wholeness again by the intervention of *brujería*. This scene illustrates the ways in which the embodied knowledge of *brujería* resists underneath a façade of order and Christian propriety, functioning as a powerful reparative practice—much like punk rage, which as I discuss in the next section, can exist alongside and resist colonial modernity. Both are a display of raging against the epistemic, gender, and class machinery of oppression in their own right.

The scene plays out in a bare and secluded empty house. Valeria is surrounded by Isabel's acquaintances who enfold her baby in red ribbon and chant, rattle staffs, and cover the protagonist with twigs and leaves. Contorting around Valeria, they whisper, putting their ritual knowledge at her service. The camera focuses on their entrancement, a stark contrast from Valeria's stoic expression. These women become guarantors of the mystical threshold between reality and the beyond, their voices carriers of this knowledge. I would argue they become the very protagonists of the scene—despite Valeria's centrality as the main character—which plays out as an acknowledgment of the value of their shared liminality, they are the unnamed heralds to a transition beyond motherhood as a defining facet of the character's journey. Their very presence is an affront to hierarchies of belief predicated within Christian practice, suggesting that queer community stands at the core of these spiritual practices and their embodied knowledge.

Here, *brujería* is underlined as collective, reparative, intergenerational knowledge practiced by Isabel's queer coven. Interestingly, and as I mention above, epistemicide has been a prerequisite of colonial modernity in the policing of knowledge and belief. It is therefore essential to understand that epistemic racism is also fundamental as a technology of coloniality. It is a categorical denial of communal knowledge as a facet of the erotic, as proposed by Audre Lorde (2018). Following Lorde, the cruelty of denying the erotic, the violence that it entails, can be said to extend to the delegitimization of racialized, feminized knowledges and spiritual practice. Folk horror, as a site where the arcane and the modern are negotiated in a power play, helps to unveil the cracks in the seemingly smooth construction of a binary between Christianity and

pre-invasion/folk belief (Scovell 2017, 6). It is in the centrality of Huesera's *las brujas*—as Garza and Castillo lovingly refer to the queer coven—that, I suggest, resistance and vindication of knowledge by means of folk, syncretic religious practice can be asserted as the reclamation of language, history, dancing, or chanting as facets of the Lordean erotic.[9] Moreover, these women also rekindle the Lordean erotic in everyday life: meeting at the market throughout the film, holding each other by the hand, greeting each other with a slight touch of the waist. Consequently, the queer "spinster aunties" gather in collectivity, and become an enclave of protection, and contention, for Valeria.

But let us not forget that this encounter with the erotic is also painful—Valeria's experience of the ritual is one of cleavage, literally tearing her body apart during a nightmarish vision—even as it insinuates freedom in the protagonist's renouncing of the exercise of motherhood constructed as a heterosexist, colonial, and capitalist arrangement. Therefore, I suggest that queer joy and community in the film become a gateway through which to tease an alternative organisation of time. Taking after Lim, Ree, and Tuck, this gesture of queering and reorganising time confronts the linear disposition that colonial modernity enforces. The film showcases this confrontation first in the unfolding of Valeria into her past and present (and, presumably, future) selves and second in considering this unfolding as enabled by the intervention of the queer elder coven fronted by her aunt. As I have explored the possibilities of reading the banishing ritual as a representation within the gothic elsewhere (forthcoming)[10], here I wish to explore the function of darkness in relation to this iteration of Mexican folk horror.

To understand its relevance, I turn to Erica Segre. She asserts that it is darkness which "[allows] us to see through a glass darkly, monstrously. The idea of nocturnal horror as a conflation of inner and outer temporalities in conflict" (2020, 3). For Segre, darkness has for a very long time provided a crucial space within Mexican literary and visual culture to negotiate, challenge and undermine national normative structures. In *Huesera*, the literal use of what Segre alludes to in Spanish as *negrura* or *tinieblas*—both terms for darkness although English translation cannot account for their respective nuances—proves significant to undermine the normative expectation of motherhood forced upon Valeria. Here, I wish to concentrate on one of the most revealing frames in the ritual, which I discuss as Valeria's recognition of herself in the Huesera.

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[9] Abia Castillo and Michelle Garza Cervera in interview by Valeria Villegas Lindvall, February 23rd, 2023.

[10] I explore the ritual's remixing of the witch as a European gothic trope and critical potential in Villegas Lindvall, "Subversive sorcery and reparative witchcraft," forthcoming.

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During the ritual, a play of doubles takes place, as Valeria/Huesera become a living/spectral juxtaposition. In *codigofágico* fashion, the film reformulates the Gothic figuration of the doppelgänger, and this tension of doubles enacts the power play between law and order and punk abandon, illustrating the juxtapositions (civilized/savage, modern/arcane, female/male and superstition/science) that enable folk horror to bring that which is buried to the surface, as I discuss in the first section of this essay. Through this game of doubles, folk horror affords revelation with its penchant for darkness—metaphorical, as arcane knowledges lurking in the shadows. Darkness is elegantly toyed with by cinematographer Nur Sherwell with the recurrent use of mirrors and reflective surfaces throughout the film, which supports the contention of the Huesera being an unfolding of Valeria and vice versa.

Segre notes that darkness allows for a liminality that can become productively critical. Tackling several works, among them José Chávez Morado's dark allegories in painting and José Revueltas' revision of abject poverty and alienation of political prisoners in literature, Segre posits that the liminality that darkness in the Mexican imaginary often represents the profound toll of violence and atrocity deeply engrained in the nation's historical inequities. A violence undetachable from coloniality, I would add. Darkness is germane to the representation of the film's last ritual and its push and pull towards knowledge, both collective and of the self, as I analyse below.

With the intercession of the *brujas*, Valeria falls into a hallucinatory fugue state that is photographed in cold greyish-blue by Sherwell. She wanders while horrible visions assail her, as the cracking of bones and bodies haunt her until she finally collapses on the floor, her body torn by exposed fractures, the rattling bones of the Bone Woman she will be revealed to be. She holds on to a teal-coloured knit baby blankie with a yellow seam, and the frame eases into the final vision of this passage, which is enfolded in darkness. Deliverance comes as she sees the blanket—with colours that suggest a pastel equivalent of the colours of the Virgin of Guadalupe's veil—dragged out of her powerless grasp. The blanket is revealed to cover a figure walking along the vacant room that extends before Valeria's gaze. Enrobed by darkness, the figure makes its way to the exit and the camera closes in to reveal that it is actually Valeria, looking at the audience but also at herself on the floor. Her wide eyes peer as the veil frames her face, and she is effectively turned into a sort of Virgin of Guadalupe. With this shot, Valeria is transformed into the ultimate national Catholic icon, a culturally specific avatar of the Virgin Mary and patron saint of Mexico.

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Suddenly, the dark is cut by blazing flames that rise from the bottom of the screen, giving way to a full shot in which the figure is engulfed by fire as she advances towards the end of the room. Darkness in this scene provides a space where radical denial can take place. The visual acknowledgement and then torching of one of the most identifiable religious icons of post-colonial Mexican identity can be understood as an operation that recognizes the normative, patriarchal imposition of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a guarantor of female obedience *and* recuperates her as a part of the character's gendered identity while disavowing the imposition by which it has come to be an icon of colonial policing of gender and sexuality.[11]

The figure burns as the character smiles, and the scene fades to black and back into the safety of the coven. Valeria comes to. It is implied she is now free, darkness is revealed as an ally. It is in darkness where the arcane and the modern—a binary central to folk horror as per Scovell's definition—dialogue to underline the arbitration of knowledge and gender, which is digested and then disowned in Valeria's recognition of herself. The next section to this essay proposes that punk abandon and collective knowledge facilitate and interweave with this recognition, bringing Valeria's foregone past back and teasing a future where queer joy and community proposes a different way of being, torching everything to start anew. As I discuss below, the film suggests interesting relations between punk and the *ethos barroco* as disobedient, subversive sites of creativity where another, non-capitalist modernity—in Enrique Dussel's words, as I cite before—is possible.

The promise of punk folk *codigofágico*

Mexican punk as urban folklore

As I state above, it is possible to consider punk and *ethos barroco* as drawing kinship in resistance, which is why I find it pertinent to discuss *Huesera* as punk folk *codigofágico*. This consideration is aptly illustrated by my discussion about the exercise of *brujería* as a practice of resistance against epistemic erasure. Similarly, punk community and identity marks Valeria's past, which is crucial in the process of returning to herself and illustrates resistance to enforced expectations within normativity. Both *brujería* and punk surround the character's quest for wholeness and the painful

[11] It is crucial to note that several feminist writers, chief among them Gloria Anzaldúa, recuperate the Virgin of Guadalupe as a powerful icon connected to pre-invasion belief in order to re-read and disobediently re-appropriate it to decolonial, anti-patriarchal ends, proving that such reading against the grain is possible.

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experiences this entails, and both appear within an ethos of resistance and sabotage in the process.

Fittingly, Greil Marcus suggests that punk can be understood as a discursive heir to the strategy where the "barbaric" opposes the tradition of the "overcivilized Old world" and weaponizes public rage as a gesture of freedom (1993, 183-184). In other words, it is the enterprise of speaking truth to power while repurposing dominant aesthetic strategies that afford ideological scaffolding to oppression. This subversive operation reveals that punk and the *ethos barroco* about which Echeverría writes hold kinship in their proclivities towards repurposing and sabotage, as I develop below.

Mexican punk has an interesting legacy of *codigofagia*. In its origins, it adopted, digested, and subverted dominant cultural codes inherited from US American and British punk. To track the heritage of punk is to chronicle the periphery of the city and its urban folklore. Punk emerged after decades of sustained criminalisation of youth, illustrated by instances like the atrocious crackdown on students and workers during Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's presidency, which was infamous for the massacre of 2 October 1968. This criminalisation continued during Luis Echeverría's presidency, which was marked by the repression of students enabled by communist fearmongering and hit its peak with the 1971 Corpus Massacre, or *El halconazo*. The prosecution of youth also remained constant throughout the following administrations led by José López Portillo and Miguel de la Madrid. Crucially, De La Madrid's presidential period (1982-1988) forwarded a public policy of "moral renovation," legitimising the continued criminalisation and disenfranchisement of impoverished youth in the prosecution of *chicos banda* (loosely, criminal youngsters). This agenda targeted punks from the periphery ensconced in the lumpenproletariat sectors of a city that had expelled them. Sensational coverage of instances of violence connected to the infamous Sex Panchitos Punk gang mobilized public opinion towards a justification of police brutality during this period and the generalised condemnation of precarious youth increased. Simultaneously, bands like Size and Ritmo Peligroso (whose respective lead vocalists man-from-everywhere Illy Bleeding and Cuban Piro Pendas continue to vie for the "first Mexican punk" title), brought about a more palatable edginess that made punk enter the collective consciousness in a more consumer-friendly fashion. In short, "boutique punk"—as Camille de Toledo would have it (2008)—looked *nothing* like the punk from the periphery. However, counterculture was alive and well, and public spaces like El Chopo Cultural Market (founded in 1980 and still active) became sites of cultural exchange and piracy a long time before NAFTA came along.

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The year 1987 was distinct in helping to cement the punk lore of Mexico City. Musically, one could set an important coordinate with the release of Atoxxico's *Punks de Mierda* EP, a critique of a complacent punk scene that had strayed away from politics. Nevertheless, women's labour in punk preceded this identifiable event, starting a couple years before with the establishment of the collective Chavas Activas Punks (Active Punk Girls, CHAPS). Interestingly, this female punk collective recalls the creation of spaces of resistance embodied in *Huesera*'s covenant of queer *brujas* while also providing a real-life reference to Valeria's and Octavia's characterisation as fierce punk women from the periphery.

CHAPS was formed by several teenage girls between 13 and 19 years of age. The collective was involved in music, fringe cultural production, fanzines, and other strategies of self-representation that carved out spaces for women, vindicating their politics, creative labour, and the defence of their bodily autonomy (Urteaga 1996, 110-114). This is how 1987 also provided the backdrop to the formation of the female punk band Virginidad Sacudida (with young women from the CHAPS collective). Despite not identifying themselves as feminists, their creation of a community that held space for women's exchange marks an often obscured, yet crucial precedent for contemporary feminist organisation in punk popularized years later by the riot grrrl movement in Anglo scenes (Viera Alcázar 2021, 220-221).

Cinematically, the representation of punk and of the youth of the periphery took different directions. In 1987, two diametrically opposed features crystallized punk memory in audiovisual culture: Arturo Velazco's *Los Sex Panchitos Punk* (*La banda de los Panchitos*, or *The Panchitos Gang*, on the heels of the punksploitation feature *Intrépidos Punks* from 1980), and Andrea Gentile's short film *La neta no hay futuro* (*Truth is, there is no future*). While the first film takes on the lives of the gang as a cautionary tale in an outrageously sensationalistic register, the second follows a punk community on the periphery of Mexico City, Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl—the place where CHAPS first took form. Crucially, Gentile's work is a documentary, and it underlines the adoption of the disenchantment of British and US American punk in the face of a crisis that continued to leave young, precarious communities abandoned.[12]

Gentile's work made visible how punks in the periphery acknowledged the codes of punk and made them their own as a way to resist imposed expectations while denouncing the disillusion bred by the

[12] This lore remains alive and was even revisited from the vantage point of queer *chicas banda* in Julián Hernández's *La Diosa del Asfalto* (*The Goddess of Asphalt*) from 2019. The film's portrayal, albeit highly stylized and romanticised, of a gang of punk women from the periphery, figuring as the scourge of rapists, suggests a contesting of Velazco's horrid instances of gender violence.

capitalist ills of precariousness, disenfranchisement, and impoverishment. The devouring, adoption, and adaptation of punk in this documentary short film exemplifies the ways in which Mexican punk can be understood as an operation of *codigofagia*. This punk *codigofágico*, which is crucial to the contemporary folk horror offered in *Huesera*, allows for an exploration of rebellion against the colonial policing of cultural, social, and political life that emerges from the management, exploitation, and administration of time in order to favour capitalist production.

Therefore, let us posit an even more daring question. What if the linearity of colonial time—necessary also for the survival of the nuclear family, to be born, reproduce and die—is *also* upset by the intervention of punk? I would argue that we can trace the operation of *codigofagia* in the trademark chronotype of US American and British punk, "there is no future." Justus Grebe offers that this chronotype can take three distinct forms: partaking in an eternal present where future is simply absent, the explicit disavowal of an undesirable present of societal and political collapse, or even the negation of certain element of the present to construct a desirable future (2013).

In acknowledging Mexican punk as urban folklore of crucial importance to the film, one can appreciate in *Huesera* a folk horror that drinks, I would argue, from the sources of the *ethos barroco* to shape a mode of resistance to capitalist disenfranchisement, redigesting the codes of punk from the Global North in unsuspected ways. As Minerva Campion writes, the subalternity of punk can function as a vantage point from which oppression can be challenged through decolonial *aesthesis*, "which enables the possibility of other ways of conceiving the world that have been suppressed by the vision and representation of modern aesthetics" (2023, 192). Campion asserts the ways in which the devaluation of the subalternized and racialized is also exercised in the realm of cultural production, sidelining punk but also making it a fruitful place to recognise and confront social vulnerabilization and minoritization of the non-subjects constituted by coloniality, namely feminized, impoverished, and/or racialized bodies. The vindication that Campion writes about has happened in interesting ways when it comes to the baroque iteration of Mexican punk, allowing it to provide a site where the asymmetry of symbolic and economic power is revealed to denounce the colonial fashioning of gender and its enmeshment with class and race. This is why punk queer joy in *Huesera*—illustrated by the scene that opens the first section to this essay—reads so potently. By foregrounding the possibility of resistance through punk community and queer tenderness, the film brings back a crucial facet of Valeria's identity, which she has foregone for

heterosexual, middle class stability, and which is to be brought back by the exercise of *brujería* as a practice of collective, reparative knowledge.

Vitally, the *ethos barroco* that Echeverría writes about and that enables the esoteric and creative can also be said to establish significant affinity with the punk ethos—as preliminarily outlined by David Beer (2014, 19-29)—in its disavowal of hierarchies, its playfulness, and undermining of dominant discourses and codes through a distinct aesthetic sensibility of sabotage through resourcefulness. Both work as an aesthetic double consciousness in the limen, as Lugones would have it (2006). *Codigofagia* and the *ethos barroco* can enable structural critique. Further, the protagonists of this critique are represented as the female, queer, impoverished subjects of the periphery that, to return to *Huesera*, Valeria left behind for middle-class reputability—but to whom she will return in the end.

The articulation of punk community as reclaiming public space and experiencing joy holds a political dimension that illustrates what Ewa Majewska defines as counterpublics in her writing about feminist antifascism, defining them as "those publics of groups that form and organize through mutual recognition of wider public exclusions so as to overcome those exclusions" (2021, 7-8). Read as a vindication of collective knowledge and joy, the constitution of the *brujas* as a group of queer elders gives a sound foundation to the portrayal of Valeria and Octavia as part of a counterpublic. The scenario that folk horror lays before our eyes is irrevocably touched by the intercession of punk as a disruptive practice in community formation, which can vindicate the erotic as a form of relationality by pushing against the excessive and pernicious individuation that characterizes capitalism.

In this capacity, the punk, queer community that *Huesera* portrays is akin to Majewska's update of Nancy Fraser's notion of feminist, subaltern counterpublics, which Majewska explains as "various counterpublics of the excluded, embracing postcolonial as well as gender politics" that can and do provide a necessary counterweight to liberal democracies and their delusions of diversity (2021, 56). In other words, the coven of elders, Valeria, and Octavia are revealed to be an intergenerational, queer, punk counterpublic in the context of *Huesera* as folk horror, reminding us that the political potency of the punk ethos lies in its capacity for contestation. Community formation is therefore revealed to be a punk gesture.

It is not insignificant that a queer, punk community of the periphery appears in *Huesera* as a powerful counterpublic. Here, it is worth noting that, as Merarit Viera Alcázar writes, rock and punk scenes are not inherently liberatory, nor have they held immediate space for feminist discourse (2021, 218). Rather, they can be suggested as originally constituted as patriarchal technologies of gender, as the author borrows

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from Teresa De Lauretis' thesis on cultural production as furthering the delineation of binary gender expectations. However, even within these constraining frames, during the past three decades women have found spaces to actively resist normative models of relationality and gender expectation, paving the way for *Huesera*'s feminist punk resistance. This makes the film's representation a provocative record of the meaningful shifts within contemporary Mexican cultural production.

Moreover, the presence of this queer, punk counterpublic opens the door for the Huesera to function as a herald of another kind of future. Following Majewska, we can readily notice how counterpublic, collective knowledge and punk community make visible forms of colonialism and imperialism manifest in the administration of time, knowledge, gender and sexuality. As I discuss in the opening sections of this essay, folk horror toys with the fear of a disintegrating status quo. In *Huesera*, the status quo is imperilled by the questioning of motherhood and normative femininity as an enforced fate for Valeria, as the film underlines the contrast between the entrapment of motherhood and the punk freedom she has foregone. It is thus that folk horror's recurrent preoccupation with the dissolution of normativity provides a background to outline and explore the forceful cleavage within Valeria as a character, as past and present reconcile, and a future of non-conformity can become a promise.

Therefore, I suggest that *Huesera* offers a negotiation of the "there is no future" chronotype. Sharing its abandon with the disobedience of colonial aesthetics, punk becomes a violent invitation towards change. An instance that illustrates this premise is Valeria's visit to a punk club in search of Octavia. This visit happens after multiple tender encounters with Octavia and provides a neat contrast between Valeria's return to her punk self and her smothering present as a married mother-to-be. It is crucial therefore to note that this passage is preceded by an encounter with her mother-in-law, who visits Valeria and her husband Raúl's apartment and gifts her with a children's book. A space that once seemed cozy now suggests entrapment, conveyed by the alternation of tight shots of Valeria's restless face and the book. We quickly cut to a wider space, an environment full of noise, punks talking and drinking, as the camera defies the steadiness of the previous scene. But there is also a place of respite and homeliness outside the club: Valeria breathes slowly and embraces Octavia. As she tries to kiss her, Octavia confronts Valeria: "You are the one that likes to pretend that you matured, that you chose the right life […] you don't know what you want." With a final "fuck off!" from Octavia, their queer erotic entanglement suggests a painful reminder of the imperatives of motherhood that Valeria has followed, as the cradle is once more revealed to be a cage.

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Valeria enters the womb of the club and stroboscopic lights bathe an indiscernible mass of punks slamming to a live band. Her ears ringing, a quick assault of shots that syncopate the banging of the drum set with her moans of excruciating pain. A quick cut to the delivery room follows: Valeria's baby has entered the world as if precipitated by her mother's confrontation with her punk self, forcefully excised from her by the mandates of heteronormative conviviality. This moment crystallizes a future that does not *and cannot* be contained in the tight frameworks of the coloniality of gender as a heterosexist arrangement. It can be something else. This suggestion poetically illuminates what queer militant Argentine poet Néstor Perlongher saw in the possibility of a "cartography of desire": a stance from where a vanishing point can be established towards multiple, dissident becomings of the minoritized (*devenires minoritarios*, an articulation he posits inspired by Felix Guattari and Suely Rolnik) that do not search to conform to stifling normativity, but rather can transit *beyond* its borders, full of glitches and discontinuities (2016, 122).[13] Ultimately, Valeria's embrace of her queer, punk self illustrates the possibilities of these cartographies of desire, where fate can be pursued by renouncing the framework of colonial, heterosexual, patriarchal, and capitalist normativity. As Valeria walks out of frame and the film ends, Perlongher's vision is teased as a promising becoming, embraced as the protagonists' last act of resistance and renouncing of conformity.

Here's to a folk, punk revolution in horror (and beyond)

Concluding remarks

By way of conclusion, I illustrate the scene from the film that portrays Valeria's final decision. As Valeria steps outside her home, leaving Raúl and her baby, she does so (metaphorically) by the hand of her *tía* and Octavia. One a queer elder, the other one a queer punk, her unfolding into an individuated Valeria outside of her role as a mother is precipitated by the intervention of punk. This moment ties together the arguments in this essay. As I demonstrate, the horrors of normativity undergo a politically relevant operation of *codigofagia* while suggesting a reparative possibility in the film. In its own way, *Huesera*'s vindication of queer relationality, knowledge and the erotic seems to take up pioneer punk director Penelope Spheeris' exhortation: "Don't make violent, negative movies with themes

[13] Perlongher cites, albeit briefly, the possibilities that punk could facilitate this navigation of discontinuities by mentioning Janice Caiafa's *Movimento Punk na Cidade. A invasão dos Bandos Sub* (1985). The essay cited here was originally published in 1991, collected in the 2016 edition referred here.

about destruction and nihilism. There's enough of that in the real world already. Make films that are life-affirming and work toward making this world a better place" (2008). There is violence in transformation, as there is in a future where colonial restraints are laid bare by way of aesthetic indictment. In this sense, women-authored, folk horror punk appears as a potent contestation. Tenderness, joy, and care appear as punk gestures where there is no capitalist, colonial future—but there might be one outside of its frameworks, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the painful unravelling to pass so it can breed lasting rebellion.

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